

Patterns of Tee-Ball Hitting

James O. Coplien, distilled from patterns related by Jack Perconte, former second baseman with the Chicago White Sox, 19 April, 1997

1.0 Introduction

The principle behind all these patterns is: “Back to Basics.” Basics simplify life for the batter. Instead of trying fancy techniques, good, solid basics are the best training for both the beginner and the pro.

These patterns are good for training new tee-ball recruits, and many of them are good for diagnosing and addressing problems in pro hitters, and everyone in between. They are also good for training and maintenance in the absence of problems.

These patterns assume the context of a right-handed batter unless otherwise stated; the transposition to left-handed batting is straightforward. Also, all these patterns generalize beyond Tee-ball to baseball unless otherwise indicated.

Many thanks to Linda Rising for comments.

2.0 Loose Grip

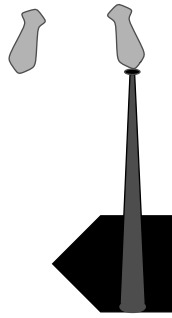
How do you help someone who can't easily control the bat?

The grip is a key element of successful hitting. Most hitters look for power, and equate power with muscle. They grip the bat tight with the most muscular part of their hand. However, they don't have good control, and they are tight all over; their elbows tighten up, so they lose control, flexibility, and extension.

Therefore, hold the bat loosely in the upper palm, ideally across the knuckles. The fingers should close over the bat first, and the thumb last, so the fingers have control.

3.0 Cover the Plate

The pitcher can pitch a strike over any part of the plate. The bat must be able to reach any part of the plate.



Therefore: Situate yourself at bat's length from the far side of the plate. You can train yourself to get into position by placing the bat on the ground and standing with your left foot at the tip of the bat.

4.0 Head Towards Home Plate

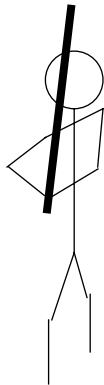
You can't transfer power to the ball and be accurate unless you're centered. How do you maintain good balance?

Balance is very important in most sports, and, in all sports, it comes from being on the balls of the feet. But it's difficult to focus directly on your feet when swinging a bat.

But other parts of your body can provide cues for balance.

Therefore, tip your head forward toward home plate. That helps keep you on the balls of your feet.

5.0 Bat Position: Arm Box



The ideal batting position can be observed by a box formed by the line between the batter's shoulders, the arms, and the bat. These patterns help maintain the arm box.



Mark McGwire shows a good batting stance; note the “box” formed by the arms and bat

It’s also important to keep the front arm close to the body, to keep the hands together, and to affect a tight swing.

5.1 Knob Points at Catcher’s Feet

Bat position is tricky. Everyone has a different style, particularly in their static, get-ready stance. But the bat position, when it hits the ball, is crucial. And while you want the batter to start “loose” in their natural style, it’s important to develop a good transition when going into the hit. It’s difficult, especially for kids, to learn this transition.

Therefore, teach yourself to point the knob of the bat at the catcher’s feet. Start learning good bat position by foregoing the fancy windup, starting from a healthy static stance. The windup will follow with time.

5.2 Glove Drill

It’s important to keep the front elbow in, close to the body, when batting. Some batters have a tendency to move their arms away from their body, which puts more of the direction control in the arms than in the hands. That makes control more difficult, and takes away power.

Therefore, train for batting by putting a glove under the left arm while swinging. That keeps the front arm close to the body, at least until the follow-through.

5.3 Raise Back Elbow Up

The back elbow position really doesn’t affect the effectiveness of a swing. However, the front elbow position is important, because good front elbow position keeps the hands close to the body to allow for a compact swing with power from the hands. If the back elbow moves down, the front elbow tends to move away from the body.

Therefore, adjust the back elbow up as necessary to keep the front elbow close to the body. That will keep the hands in a position that guarantees a compact whip of a swing.

[Really want to rotate the whole body into the ball as a unit, so keep the back elbow in so that the hands, hips, and back knee rotate at the same time as you rotate toward the pitcher into the ball—2000/10/20 Josh Rabe]

6.0 Rhythm and Movement

There are so many rules to follow here, and the pros have their little rituals before hitting; should I do those, too?

Every batter has his or her own style; Mark Grace has his bat swinging around; others wiggle their behinds; others rock back and forth. Too much movement can be distracting, yet it's important to keep loose; you don't want the rules of stance to create frozen statues at the plate!

Therefore, adopt a loose stance and some movement that keeps you loose while waiting for the windup and pitch. Move your hands a little, get a rocking rhythm, wiggle, or move the bat—every batter has his or her own style. Move into a good stance right before the hit, at the latest, but don't freeze into that position too early.

7.0 Front Shoulder Toward Pitcher

How do you keep from opening up too soon or too late?

If your stance is too closed or open, you'll tend to hit foul balls. And if your shoulders aren't properly oriented with respect to your feet, you'll end up losing power (if you're turned too far into the swing) or your balance (if you're cranked backward).

Therefore, stand with your front shoulder pointed at the pitcher, level with the back shoulder or slightly down. The pitcher should be able to read the last two or three letters of your name on the back of your jersey. You should be in a relaxed position.

[Actually, toward the second baseman, then you go to right field—actually, between pitcher mound and second baseman]

8.0 Step Toward Pitcher

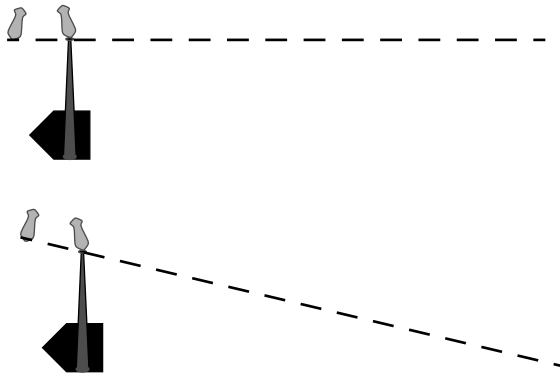
You want to put your full weight into a hit, to transfer as much energy as possible into the ball. Each batter has a stride of slightly different length and style.

Therefore, when you take the step, step directly toward the pitcher. Your energy will transfer into the bat, and into the ball. Make sure it is a controlled step, and that you maintain balance throughout the swing, using Head Towards Home Plate.

9.0 Feet Point the Hit

A hitter has a lot of leeway in the batter's box. The hitter can plant his or her feet in any orientation. As much as the upper body may try to orient itself to the diamond, the body tends to follow the feet. And the orientation of the body affects the direction the ball will be hit.

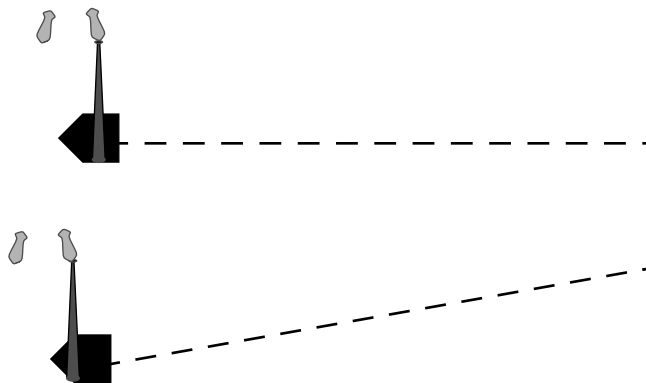
Therefore, line up your feet to point where the ball will hit. Stay on the balls of your feet by keeping the Head Towards Home Plate.



10.0 Pulling and Slicing

Batters must hit the ball in the strike zone, usually over the plate. Too far in front of the plate, and the batter would have to leave the batter's box. Too far behind the plate and the batter would interfere with the catcher. The orientation of the batter, relative to the plate, dictates the angle of the bat, relative to the plate, at the time the bat meets the ball.

Therefore, move back in the batting box to “pull” or “hook” the ball into left field, and move up in the batting box to “slice” the ball into right field.



11.0 The Swing

A good finish position for the swing is to have the back foot touching just on the toe. The knee and belly button should be facing the pitcher, the hands finish high, and the head should be down over the shoulder—looking at the top of the tee.

11.1 Hands Stay Back

What do you do when a power hitter starts dribbling the ball off the tee?

Sometimes power hitters open up too soon; their hands drift forward and they barely bobble the ball. They are eager to meet the ball, but opening up too soon leaves the shoulders in a position where they can't contribute much more to the swing when the ball and bat meet. It also moves the weight forward, so hitters can't put their body into the hit.

Therefore, keep the hands back to keep the shoulders from opening up, so you have power left to hit the ball. This keeps the weight on the back foot during the step.

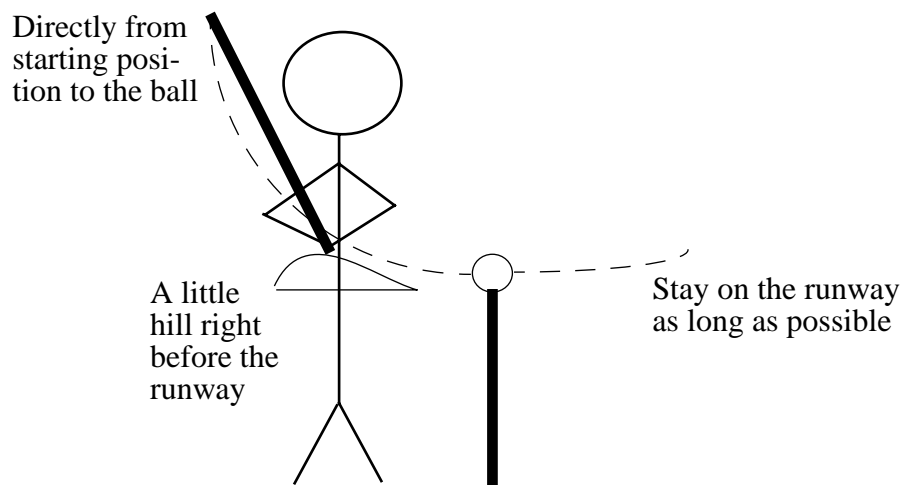
11.2 Land the Airplane

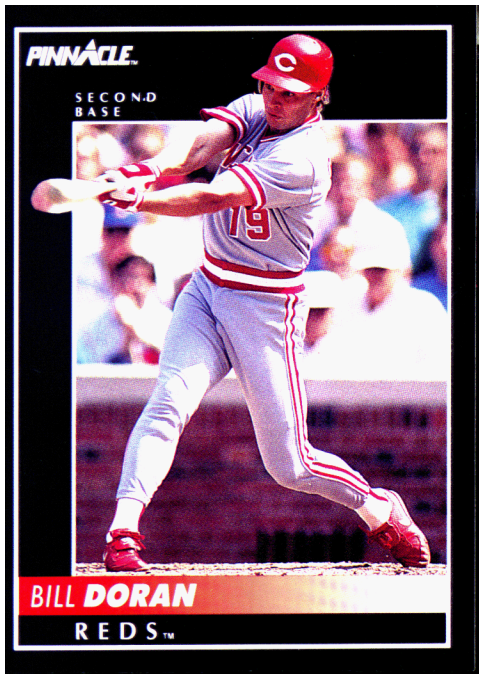
How do you deal with dribbles off the tee in new hitters, and pop-fly outs in power hitters?

Power hitters try to optimize distance by swooping under the ball to give it height; that results in pop flies. Many hitters will contact the ball at many odd angles, resulting in unspectacular departures from the tee.

Therefore, throw the tip of the bat from its starting position (see Bat Position) to the ball as directly as possible. Pretend that the tip of a bat is an airplane, and that the hitting zone is the runway. The bat should come down and make a level "landing" through the ball, without any swoops or dives. Stay on the runway as long as possible.

Pretend there is a little hill right before the runway, to emphasize that the bat shouldn't swoop low prematurely (see drawing).





Bill Doran, Cincinnati Reds, showing palm-up/palm-down

In a proper hit, the palms are in a palm-up/palm-down position at contact (see Bill Doran at left), and the ball will have a backspin that carries it up. A good hit is a whip, but the wrists don't roll at the point of contact!

11.2.1 See the Bat Hit the Ball

How do you guarantee good head position?

Young hitters often open up too soon, turning their heads to see the ball go over the outfield fence. That pulls the bat and causes it to nick the ball, so it dribbles off.

Therefore, watch the bat hit the ball. Hit and run regardless of where the ball is hit; they can see where the hit went once they get to first base safely.

Another training trick is to squat on the opposite side of the plate from the batter, and hold up some

number of fingers for a moment right after the batter hits the ball. Ask the batter how many fingers were held up; if the batter can tell you, then the head is in the right position.

11.2.2 Eyes on Top of Tee

How do you guarantee good head position?

This is the same problem as in See the Bat Hit the Ball, only in Tee-ball. In See the Bat Hit the Ball, the batter's eyes must follow the ball from the pitcher. However, in Tee-ball, the ball is not pitched.

Therefore, the batter should focus on the top of the tee. Eyes should stay on the top of the tee all the way through the swing.

11.2.3 Bat Grabs the Ball

Many hitters fail to hit with extension, losing power. How do you get them to think of the hit in a way that gets good extension?

Young hitters know that when the bat hits the ball, the ball bounces off the bat and flies into play. Many players aim the bat to stop about where the ball is, and fail to follow through. Others follow through a bit. Still others swing the bat around their back and end losing their balance as the bat carries them around. All these avoid using the bat to give the ball its greatest possible energy.

Therefore, think of throwing the ball with the end of the bat. Hit *through* the ball and toward the pitcher.

This is an alternative to staying on the runway for as long as possible in Land the Airplane.

11.3 Shift weight forward

In a good hit, the weight should shift toward the ball. How do you know whether you're doing that?

Through most of the hit, the weight is on the back foot, until the end of taking the step. But to get the full power into the ball, the whole body must be behind the hit. That means the weight must shift forward.



Therefore, to make sure your weight is shifting correctly, try to end the swing with your stepping foot firm, next to the plate, and your back foot touching the ground only on its toe, supporting no weight.

11.4 Third Strike

Though the step contributes to power, it detracts from balance. How do you balance these two?

Sometimes a batter tries a power hit on the first two strikes, but fails to connect. This is a sign that the hitter needs more stability for the pitch.

Former Cub Henry Cotto ends with his back toe on the ground, weight on his front foot, bat all around up in the air; belly button and knees point to pitcher.

Therefore, avoid the step on the third strike. Widen the stance to get good balance, and either avoid the step, or take only a baby step into the swing

11.5 Balance Through Swing

Some hitters will swing the bat around and lose their balance at the end of the swing. How can you help keep your balance?

Therefore, keep the feet wider than the shoulders by a little bit. You *must* be on the balls of your feet (Head Towards Home Plate); that's an absolute. Don't pull back.

12.0 Hit Every Pitch

There's a psychology of hitting: should you let the first pitch by? How do you know you should be "psyched" to swing at a pitch? If you pick and choose, a good pitch might go by.

Therefore, think that every pitch is "your pitch." Be intellectually prepared to hit every ball that's pitched to you.

Appendix

Cope,

Bill Richardson, the author of Play Ball, just brought me a copy of “A hitting checklist,” reprinted from Baseball Fundamentals and Strategy by Richard Bergquist and Charles Roys that appeared in a Florida newspaper. It’s amazing how this checklist matches your patterns :-)!

Thanks, Bill :-)!

A hitting checklist

1. Have confidence, anticipate every pitch.
2. Get a good pitch to hit, know your pitch.
3. Use the proper bat grip.
4. Use the proper stance; minimize stance related weaknesses.
5. Keep the weight on the balls of your feet.
6. Remain relaxed, knees slightly bent.
7. Use the proper stride, toward pitch, not too long.
8. Cock the bat, press back slightly, no severe hitch.
9. Keep eyes on the ball.
10. Start swing, explode, be quick.
11. Snap hips around.
12. Swing level, throw the head of the bat at the ball.
13. Roll wrists after contact.
14. Follow-through.

Linda Rising

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To: cope@lucent.com

Subject: Tee-Ball Patterns

Mime-Version: 1.0

Content-Type: text/plain; charset=us-ascii

Status: OR

Cope,

Linda Rising just gave me a copy of your Patterns of Tee-Ball Hitting.

I enjoyed it, and will try some of the patterns, but I have a minor suggestion. The title, "Patterns of Tee-Ball Hitting" excludes coach pitch, and opposing team pitch. Some of the patterns deal exclusively with a pitched ball, while others deal exclusively with a ball on a tee. Still others are common to both. By choosing a more inclusive title, you will have less risk of losing some readers. A pony league coach might see the title, and figure that it doesn't apply to his or her coaching situation.

A pattern that I use for T-Ball is Smack the Logo

The problem is that Kids tend to watch their coach, parents, bat, or anything but the ball. Unfortunately keeping the eyes on the ball is critical to good hitting.

Therefore the ball is placed on the tee with the logo centered, and facing the backstop. The child is instructed to look at the logo, and hit the middle of it.

Patterns on hitting are great, but if you really wanted to do t-ball, coach pitch, and baseball coaches a favor, you would write a pattern language on Chilling Out the Little League Parents!

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Mime-Version: 1.0

Content-Type: text/plain; charset=us-ascii

Status: OR

Cope,

I thought you might like an update on using your hitting patterns.....

I've taken my kids to the batting cage a few times over the last month and have used your patterns to try to correct things/improve things.

Both my kids were either striking out a lot or walking. Neither were contacting the ball.

Amanda, my 8 year old, plays with a pitching machine. In the early part of the season she was striking out all the time. Mostly with wild swings that had no effect. After one session, she started making contact and reaching base half the time, usually on a fielder's choice.

The last two games, however, she has reached base safely every at bat.

Last game she had two singles, a triple, and an inside-the-park home run with a close play at the plate (the catcher dropped the ball).

Geoffrey, my 11 year old, is facing live pitching for the first time (t-ball and coach pitch before). Unfortunately, he was hit by a pitch the first game and started shying away from the ball. He walked about half the time and struck out the rest, never swinging. After a couple of sessions at the batting cage he finally started standing in on the pitches, swinging occasionally, still walking a lot (he has a good eye if the ump's are calling a good zone). Three games ago he finally got his first hit, an infield single to second (I can fault him for his foot speed). Two games ago he hit a couple of singles, one a sacrifice/fielder's choice. Last game, he walked a couple of times, then got hit by a pitch. But the next time up he stood right in there,

fouling a couple off and finally striking out swinging.

In short, the patterns really helped me get a couple of things across to my kids that I was having trouble with. I couldn't tell them anything that helped and showing them wasn't doing the trick either. I tried to get my son to actually read the patterns, but he wasn't interested.

Now for some business.....we use Eyes on Top of Tee for our class. I was wondering if you have added it to the package yet. We currently have it in our slides, but would like to pull it out into the patterns packet. If you have it, could you please send it to me? If you don't, is it okay to put it into AGCS format for the class?

I think that's all for now.....

David

--

David E. DeLano

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